

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC FORUMS TO IDENTIFY KEY STATE OBJECTIVES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The Commission on Higher Education facilitated seven public forums across the state between November 19 and December 3, 2002. The purpose of the forums was to engage stakeholders in a discussion about the most critical objectives for the state to pursue in its long-range plan for higher education. A total of 257 individuals participated in the forums. Only 34 of the participants had been involved previously in the planning process; therefore, 223 new stakeholders were engaged as a result of the forums.

The seven forum discussions centered on the 31 objectives proposed in October by the Long-Range Plan Core Issue Teams, although additional topics, including the proposed restructuring of the public research universities, were also broached. The discussions provided strong affirmation of the following key issues mentioned by Governor James E. McGreevey at his Higher Education Summit on November 11, 2002.

- Long-term commitment on behalf of the state to provide for ongoing, consistent state financing
- Capacity to serve a diverse and growing population
- Collaboration between and among educational institutions
- Linkages with business and other sectors of society
- Quality, efficiency, and accountability

The discussions also recognized several common objectives among those proposed by the core issue teams and those of the proposed restructuring of the public research universities.

The following synopsis summarizes the common themes that arose in close to 14 hours of discussion. The entire set of notes from the forums, including all participants' viewpoints, will be provided to the Steering Committee and issue teams for consideration as they proceed with the planning process.

There was general consensus within all of the forums that several of the 31 proposed objectives are overlapping and should be combined. There was also a general consensus that some objectives are more appropriately considered as sub-objectives of others. The summary is organized by topic.

Ongoing State Support

The first objective listed, establishing and maintaining sufficient state investments in higher education to achieve the state's objectives, was considered foundational to everything else. Without sufficient funding for all sectors, capacity, collaboration, workforce development, and quality are going to suffer.

While increased funding was considered the most critical objective by many participants, it was suggested that the funding objective is more appropriately listed last as opposed to first.

There was concern about the term "sufficient" as well as the term "adequate," which is used in other objectives, because there is not clear policy or understanding of what the terms represent. Many comments were offered to support the importance of increased state support to meet capacity needs, to meet ongoing and growing costs to operate, to attract outstanding faculty and students, and, in general, to achieve the aspirations of the vision.

There was broad agreement that the objectives related to state operating aid and ongoing state capital investment should be combined with the first objective. Objective 23, which called for adequate and predictable resources to achieve excellence, was also considered by many to be tied to operating and capital support, although they recognized that some targeted funding is necessary to address specific objectives as well.

Objective 5, which called for targeted investments beyond policy-driven base support to enable the state to meet its objectives, was considered to be generally covered by objective 1 and more specifically covered by other objectives which would require investments to achieve them. Some expressed the opinion that targeted investments take away from more important base aid.

Objective 6, regarding student financial aid, was recognized as a critical element of higher education that is necessary to meet many of the other objectives, particularly those involving the diverse population, inclusiveness, and preparation to meet workforce needs. Affordability, access, and choice were stressed as considerations in reviewing the possible expansion or creation of new programs.

Capacity to Serve the Growing and Diverse Population

The need to increase capacity to meet the state's higher education needs was considered extremely important (Objective 7). The use of various strategies to expand institutional capacity was supported, recognizing the need for additional state support for operating and capital needs, increased collaboration on all fronts, expanded and innovative uses of technology, and enhanced institutional efficiencies.

Increased capacity was considered necessary to provide an opportunity for all New Jerseyans to benefit from higher education. This was considered particularly important to achieve the goal of serving those who are underserved or underrepresented.

Increased capacity was also seen as directly tied to making any headway on Objective 10, stemming the tide of students who leave the state to attend college. Additional suggestions were made to help stem outmigration as well, such as incentives for students to stay in New Jersey to prepare for high-demand occupations. Outmigration was also seen as related to the need for increased efforts to provide for smooth transfer of students from community colleges to senior institutions.

Several participants raised the issue of regional needs, stressing the importance of serving areas of the state that have long been underserved.

Collaboration Between and Among Educational Institutions

There was very broad support for increased and improved collaboration between and among higher education institutions and also between and among higher education institutions and early childhood, elementary, and secondary schools.

The need to improve transfer and articulation from community colleges to senior institutions (Objective 12) was considered important for several reasons, such as to better serve students, to decrease degree completion time, to use resources more efficiently, and to help stem outmigration.

The need for increased collaboration with P-12 (Objectives 13 -15) was recognized as essential to facilitate transition from high school to college, to improve the quality of teaching and learning from preschool to college, and to prepare more effective teachers for the future.

Higher Education Linkages with Business and Other Sectors of Society

Objective 16, the need for systemic statewide dialogue and collaboration between higher education and business, nonprofits, and the public sector, was considered extremely important for the state's economy. It was seen as the primary objective in this section, with the others (Objectives 17-22) as means to achieve it.

The most commonly referenced sub-objective was Objective 21, creating and nurturing clusters of innovation to advance state and regional economic competitiveness and quality of life.

The importance of enhancing linkages, meeting workforce needs, increasing external funding for institutional R&D, and meeting the needs of the pharmaceutical and other key state industries was mentioned repeatedly.

Objective 22, to position higher education in the forefront of the state's ongoing strategic planning and development, was considered important, and the adoption and implementation of a state plan for higher education was considered the key to doing that.

Quality, Efficiency, and Accountability

There was strong support to achieve and sustain high levels of excellence in teaching and learning, research, and public service. Objective 23, recognizing higher education as a crucial state priority and supporting it, was considered critical to achieving the vision. The strong support extended to investment to improve the reputation and visibility of New Jersey's colleges and universities (Objective 31).

Quality was recognized as tied to accountability, efficiency, and the need to improve student outcomes. The importance of preparing all students to maximize their potential and developing mutually acceptable accountability measures was stressed, as was the link between quality and the need for clear missions and strategic mission differentiation.

Several suggested that targeted funding will be necessary to achieve excellence in some areas, such as seed money to enhance centers and programs to make them world-class. Investments should be generated from the public and private sectors.

Restructuring of Public Research Universities

Comments regarding the proposed restructuring of the public research universities were primarily from the forums held at Rutgers University and Stockton College. In general, there was concern expressed regarding limited information about what it will cost. Others felt it created potential to harm currently successful programs that are not the focus of the initiative.

Specific concerns were raised about too much emphasis on health sciences, the potential negative impact of the restructuring on South Jersey, and the current underfunding of the universities.

Others saw the restructuring as a crucial part of the long-range plan for higher education to achieve the vision. Some spoke of the potential cost as a concern but recognized that splitting and duplicating resources is also a concern.

Other

Some participants made comments that were not specifically related to the proposed objectives or the proposal to restructure the public research universities. Most of those comments varied widely and will be shared with the Steering Committee and the teams as they continue with the planning process.

The one common theme that was raised was the need for a central voice for higher education at the state level. Some mentioned the legislation to recreate a Department of Higher Education, but most did not support such a move. Many stressed the need for a cabinet-level position to speak for all of higher education.